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Ontario  
Women's  
Directorate

Honourable Ian Scott,  
Attorney General and  
Minister Responsible  
for Women's Issues

# Women in the Labour Force

## "Labour Unions"

o. 3 in a series of fact sheets

### PREAMBLE

Over the last two decades, women have significantly increased their membership in labour unions. In 1962, 248,884 women in Canada belonged to a union; by 1982 this figure had increased to 985,376.<sup>1</sup> The female proportion of total union membership has also increased from 16.4% in 1962 to 32.3% in 1982. Data for Ontario show similar increases.

### 1. CANADA

Between 1962 and 1982 the female labour force in Canada grew from 1,788,000 to 4,926,000 an increase of 175.5%.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, over this same period of time the size of the male labour force in Canada increased by 45.4%.

The result has been a change in the composition of Canada's labour force. In 1962, 27.2% of the Canadian labour force were women; by 1982 women made up 41.2% of the labour force. (Table One).

**TABLE ONE**  
Women in the Labour Force, Canada

	1962	1971	1982
Number in the Labour Force	1,788,000	2,972,000	4,926,000
% of Total Labour Force	27.2%	34.4%	41.2%
Participation Rate*	29.0%	39.4%	51.7%

\*See Appendix

The growth in the number of women in the labour force has been accompanied by a substantial increase in their union membership. As well, women have joined unions at a much faster rate than men.

**Table Two** indicates that between 1962 and 1982 the number of male union members increased by about 65% while the number of female union members increased by almost 300%.

**TABLE TWO**  
Labour Union Membership by Sex, Canada

	1962	1971	1982	% Increase 1962-1982
Women	248,884	558,138	985,376	295.9%
Men	1,268,701	1,817,044	2,069,068	63.1%
TOTAL	1,517,585	2,375,182	3,054,444	101.3%

The increased unionization of women has been more than a function of their increased labour force activity. In fact, women have joined unions at a rate which exceeds the growth of the female labour force. **Table Three** shows the percentage increase in labour force activity and the increase in union activity for women and men. Since 1971 women's union activity increased by 76.6%, while the female labour force grew by 65.7%. In contrast, the rate of increase in union activity of men was less than the rate of increase in their labour force activity.

**TABLE THREE**  
Changes in Labour Force and Union Activity  
by Sex, Canada 1971 - 1982

	% Increase Labour Force	% Increase Union Activity
Women	65.7%	76.6%
Men	24.1%	14.3%

The higher rate of unionization of women (76.6%) compared to men (14.3%) is largely due to the growth of unions in the public sector, particularly in the fields of health, education and public administration, where a large proportion of women are employed.

Women are still under-represented, however, in overall union membership. In 1982, women constituted 41.2% of the total labour force, but comprised only 32.3% of all union members. This under-representation is due in part to the industrial distribution of women workers. The majority of women work in industries with below average rates of unionization, as shown in **Table Four**. In 1982, 55.0% of female paid workers<sup>3</sup> were employed in trade and community, business, and personal service. The rates of unionization in these industries were 9.0% and 26.3% respectively, while the average rate for all industries was 33.3%.



**TABLE FOUR**  
Level of Unionization, Women as a Percentage of Total Workers, and Percentage Distribution of Women Workers, by Industry, Canada, 1982

	% All Paid Workers Unionized	% Distribution of Female Paid Workers	Women as % of Total Paid Workers
Agriculture	0.2	—	31.3
Forestry	39.3	0.1	7.1
Fishing & Trapping	45.5	—	—
Mines, Quarries & Oil Wells	32.9	0.1	13.3
Manufacturing	44.3	15.3	27.2
Construction	61.8	0.2	10.0
Transportation			
Communications & Other Utilities	54.0	9.5	23.3
Trade	9.0	5.8	43.7
Finance, Insurance & Real Estate	3.0	1.1	61.8
Community, Business & Personal Service	26.3	49.2	61.8
Public Administration	68.7	18.5	37.2
TOTAL	33.3	100.0	42.0

**Table Four** also shows the percentage of workers in each industry who are female. The industries with the highest percentage of female workers in 1982 were finance, insurance and real estate (61.8%), community, business and personal services (61.8%) and trade (43.7%). These are also industries with low levels of unionization (3.0%, 26.3% and 9.0% respectively).

Although **Tables Two** and **Three** indicate an increase in unionization for both women and men, the majority of Canadian workers do not belong to a union as shown in **Table Five**.

**TABLE FIVE**  
Union Members as a Percentage of Paid Workers By Sex, Canada, 1982

	Male	Female	Total
Paid Workers	5,552,000	4,024,000	9,576,000
Union Members	2,069,068	985,376	3,054,444
% Unionized	37.3%	24.5%	31.9%

Only 31.9% of paid workers in Canada were members of unions in 1982. Furthermore, despite the growth in the numbers of women unionists, less than a quarter of female paid workers are unionized.

## II. ONTARIO

The data on union membership for Ontario show similar changes in both women's labour force activity and their levels of unionization. The size of the female labour force in Ontario has almost tripled in the past two decades, and the proportion of the total labour force which is female has increased from 28.8% in 1962 to 42.7% in 1982.

**TABLE SIX**  
Women in the Labour Force, Ontario

	1962	1971	1982
Number in the Labour Force	697,000	1,181,000	1,924,000
% of Total Labour Force	28.8%	35.9%	42.7%
Participation Rate	31.9%	42.9%	55.8%

The increase in the labour force participation rate of Ontario women has been accompanied by a substantial rise in female union membership (**Table Seven**). The number of unionized women increased by 87.8% in the last 11 years, which is higher than the percentage increase in the number of unionized women nationwide.

**TABLE SEVEN**  
Labour Union Membership by Sex, Ontario

	1971	1982	1971-1982 % Increase
Women	176,342	336,736	91.0%
Men	721,113	759,045	5.3%
TOTAL	897,455	1,095,781	22.1%

Nevertheless, the rate of unionization of women in the province has been somewhat lower than for the rest of the country, as shown in **Table Eight**.

**TABLE EIGHT**  
% of Female Paid Workers Who Are Union Members, Canada and Ontario

	1971	1982
Canada	22.9%	24.5%
Ontario	17.8%	21.0%

III. TYPE OF LABOUR ORGANIZATION

The growth in female union membership has been accompanied by a change in the pattern of distribution of women members among international, national and government unions. As shown in **Table Nine**, there have been substantial increases in female membership in all three types of unions. However, female membership in national and government employee unions has increased at a higher rate than in international unions. Between 1971 and 1982, the number of women in national and government employees unions increased by 211.6% and 107.1% respectively, while the number of women in international unions increased by only 32.2%.

TABLE NINE  
Female Labour Union Membership by Type of Labour Organization, Ontario

	1971	1982	% Increase 1971-1982
International Unions	97,344	128,726	32.2%
National Unions	42,471	132,345	211.6%
Government Employees' Organizations	36,527	75,665	107.1%
TOTAL	176,342	336,736	91.0%

TABLE TEN  
Percentage Distribution of Female Union Members and Women as a Percentage of Total Union Members by Type of Labour Organization Ontario

	% Distribution of Female Members		Women as % of Total Membership	
	1971	1982	1971	1982
International Unions	55.2%	38.2%	15.0%	20.9%
National Unions	24.1%	39.3%	33.8%	45.5%
Government Employees' Organizations	20.7%	22.5%	30.0%	39.8%
TOTAL	100.0%		19.6%	30.7%

An examination of the distribution of female union members shows corresponding changes. In 1971, international unions represented 55.2% of total female union members in Canada, but by 1982 this figure had dropped to 38.2% (**Table Ten**). During that period the proportion of female union members which belonged to national unions increased from 24.1% to 39.3%, and the proportion which belonged to government employees unions increased from 20.7% to 22.5%.

This distribution of female members by type of labour organization is related to the occupational concentration of these union groups; national and government employees unions represent more clerical, service, and professional workers, while the international unions are concentrated in the industrial sector where proportionately fewer women are employed.

Until very recently most women belonged to unions where they made up a minority of membership. In 1971, for example, 56.3% of female union members belonged to unions with more than fifty per cent male membership (**Table Eleven**). By 1982, however, this figure had declined to 49.7%.

TABLE ELEVEN  
Percentage Distribution of Women Union Members by Proportion of Female Members in Their Unions, Canada

	1971	1982
Unions with Less than 10% Female Membership	5.0	4.0
Unions with 10% to 50% Female Membership	51.3	45.7
Unions with 50% to 90% Female Membership	37.2	38.6
Unions with More than 90% Female Membership	6.5	11.7
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

Women are not yet represented in the executive boards of unions in Canada in proportion to their overall union membership. Although the number of women executive board members increased considerably between 1971 and 1982 (from 68 to 158) women still comprise only 18.4% of total executive board membership. However 32.3% of total union membership in 1982 was female.

TABLE TWELVE  
Women Executive Board Members and Women as Percentage of Total Executive Board Members, by Type of Union, Canada (4)

	1971		1982	
	#	%	#	%
International Unions	6	5.2	2	1.9
National Unions	49	12.6	126	25.7
Government Employees' Organizations	13	6.2	30	11.5
TOTAL	68	9.5	158	18.4



IV. WOMEN AND UNION ACTIVITY

The statistical information given in this fact sheet indicates that women are under-represented in unions relative to men's level of representation. Furthermore, women who are members of unions are proportionately under-represented on the executive boards of their unions. These patterns are true for both Canada and Ontario, and have continued despite dramatic increases in women's union activity in recent years. This under-representation is due to a combination of structural and sociological factors.

As noted above, women tend to be employed in industries which do not have strong traditions of unionization. Moreover, a greater proportion of women than men are employed in smaller establishments, which are less likely to be unionized than larger workplaces.<sup>5</sup>

Another important structural factor is the incidence of part-time work. In Canada and in Ontario, almost one quarter of employed women worked part-time (25.1% and 25.8% respectively in 1982). Part-time workers are more difficult for union representatives to contact since they often work irregular hours and may be unavailable for meetings.

Lack of official language skills may pose additional barriers to union activity; immigrant women from non-English or French-speaking countries often have fewer opportunities to learn an official language than their spouses.

Many women and men assume that care for the home and family is the woman's responsibility. This constitutes a key sociological factor limiting women's union activity. If a woman works outside the home for pay, this results in a double burden, and may mean that most of her time outside working hours is spent running the household and caring for the family. If her spouse does not support her union involvement, it may be difficult for a woman to attend union meetings and union training programs. In addition, lack of appropriate, affordable child care (a problem which can be increased by shift work or irregular hours) will further deter involvement in union activities.

Finally, since a significant number of union locals are male-dominated, women lack suitable role models for union activity. They may be unaware of the important leadership roles played by individual women in the history of many unions, and may conclude that women have no place in the union. Furthermore, some women may doubt their own ability to participate in the union, due to lack of knowledge of procedures. Since women tend to socialize with other women on the job, they do not have access to the same pools of knowledge and experience as the men.

FOOTNOTES

- 1. All statistical data on labour unions are from Statistics Canada. **Corporations and Labour Unions Return Act: Part II - Labour Unions**, Catalogue 71-202 (annual), 1971 and 1982 unless otherwise noted. Data from 1971 are based on 172 unions representing 10,361 locals. Data from 1982 are based on returns from 183 labour organizations reporting on 13,598 locals. 1971 data are used to provide an approximate midpoint between 1962 and 1982, which are the earliest and latest years for which data is available.
- 2. All labour force data are from Statistics Canada, **The Labour Force**, Catalogue 71-001 (monthly report and annual averages).
- 3. Paid workers in the labour force refers to all members of the labour force except unpaid family workers and the self-employed.
- 4. Statistics Canada, Business Finance Division, unpublished data.
- 5. Julie White, **Women and Unions**. (Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1980), pp. 46-50.

APPENDIX

The labour force includes people who are employed full-time or part-time, and people who are unemployed but seeking work. Women's labour force activity is measured in two ways:

(I) Percentage of Total Labour Force

In Canada in 1982, 41.2% of the total labour force was female. That is, out of every ten workers and job seekers, approximately 4 were female.

Male	Female
58.8%	41.2%

Fig. 1: Total Labour Force, Canada, 1982

(II) Participation Rate.

The participation rate of women is the percentage of all adult women (age 15 years and over) who are in the labour force, either employed or unemployed and seeking work. In 1982 the participation rate of women in Canada was 51.7%.

Not in Labour Force	In Labour Force
48.3%	51.7%

Fig. 2: Total Population of Adult Women, Canada, 1982.



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